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Commentary on Ruhl

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DEALING WITH PROPOSITIONS: A REPLY TO RÜHL

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The strain between the common treatment of authority as a fallacy and our equally common reliance on it in everyday life is quite properly the beginning of this investigation. An appeal to authority does not seem to provide a reason why some proposition is in fact true; it is not true, for example, that there is life on other planets because the authority says there is. But the appeal to authority does appear to provide a reason for someone to do something with a proposition, namely (I will assume here) to take it as true. Or as Rühl puts it, we accept an appeal to authority on a "pragmatic basis."

This conception of authority Rühl derives from a core analogy that I think rewards careful examination. He compares the "everyday rationality" evident when we accept appeals to authority with the "everyday rationality" we display when we make agreements. My roommate and I work it out: we agree that we will take Saturday to be cleaning day. From now on, we will act as if this proposition were true. Although we know that our agreement may break down—it may turn out that Saturdays are not cleaning days—still, it is in some cases reasonable to enter into such agreements.

Rühl suggests that we are able to reach agreements about propositions like "there is life on other planets" in the same way as we are able reach agreement about propositions like "Saturday is cleaning day." Now, this is in a general way a very interesting thought. But the analogy just as it stands cannot be extended to appeals to authority. For situations involving authority, as Rühl himself notes, always involve an inequality. I and my roommate are roughly equal when it comes to cleaning; but the authority and I do not stand on equal ground when it comes to the proposition that there is life on other planets. I suggest therefore that we adopt the following revision of the analogy. When I accept the proposition that an authority puts forward, it is like when I accept a used car from its owner. The authority and I, the owner and I, do not stand on equal ground; he knows more than I do about the subject of our agreement—the existence of life on other planets, the state of the car. Nevertheless, in some circumstances, we are able to reach agreement. As it ends up, I agree to take the car" together with its liabilities, such as the car payments; it also ends up that I agree to take it that there is life on other planets, together with whatever liabilities that proposition carries with it.

But why? Why is it rational to accept appeals to authority? We are familiar with the way we reach agreements about used cars: we end up agreeing because we have made a deal. Rühl proposes that something similar is happening when we take propositions on authority. When an authority invites me to take the proposition as true, he takes responsibility for helping me find my way from my initial beliefs to this new one. He undertakes to resolve any problems I may encounter along the way, to answer any doubts or objections I may have—he undertakes to give me arguments. He does this just because he has put forward a proposition for me, as a consequence of what Rühl calls the "genuine argumentativity of language itself." And it is just this that renders the appeal to authority acceptable. I can reasonably expect the proposition to be defended if questions arise, I can expect this precisely because the authority has put it forward in the dialogue, and based on this expectation, I can find the appeal to authority acceptable. Thus the authority and I make a deal: I take the proposition, he promises

to give me arguments. And this too is an interesting thought, one worth examining.

Why should I make this deal? What inducement does the promise of arguments give me to take a proposition? In general, I am willing to make a deal if I get something of value. What then is of value in this deal? Not the promise of arguments—arguments themselves are not valuable (except perhaps to the logophiliac). Instead, the value I get from the authority—deal is from the proposition itself: namely, I take something to be true that is in fact true.¹ It is like when I take the used car; there I get the value of owning a good, usable car. My concern in working this deal out is not to get some value over and above the proposition or the car, but to confirm that the proposition or the car is indeed valuable. Now, as noted above, I am not on the same level as the person with whom I'm dealing on precisely this question. He knows, we are assuming, much better than I whether the car works and whether there is life on other planets. To complete the deal, he has to give me some reason to trust him when he tells me that the proposition or car is a good one.

We know how we handle this problem with car deals. The owner of the car offers me the car together with a guarantee. He promises to make any repairs needed, say within the first year. I can be reasonably sure that the car owner would not make this promise unless he had good reason to believe that no major repairs would be needed. The guarantee therefore gives me a reason to trust his assessment of the car, i.e. a reason to believe that the car is in fact valuable. I am willing to make this deal: to accept the car together with a promise of repairs.

It seems plausible that the deal Rühl describes proceeds just like this. The authority offers me the proposition together with a guarantee. He promises to give me arguments answering any doubts or objections that I may encounter when I try to take the proposition as true. I can be reasonably sure that he would not make this promise unless he knew that he would be able to answer my doubts and objections. His guarantee of arguments therefore gives me a reason to trust his assessment of the proposition, i.e. a reason to believe that the proposition is in fact valuable. I might be willing to make this deal: to accept the proposition together with a promise of repair-by-argument.

This sort of deal with arguments is not unfamiliar; in fact, Fred Kauffeld argues elsewhere at this Conference² that it is just the deal we know under the name "burden of proof." In some cases, Kauffeld shows, we are willing to take the fact that someone undertakes a burden of proof as an inducement to do something with a proposition—for example, to give it tentative consideration. But is a promise of arguments sufficient to induce me to take a proposition on authority? Let me suggest some reasons for believing that the answer must be "no."

(1) The burden of the car guarantee rests primarily on the guarantor. The deal can be worked out so that if the car breaks down, I will be put to as little trouble as possible—for example, I could be loaned a car while the repairs are being made. This is not the case with the argument guarantee. It places an unavoidable burden on me to listen to the arguments the authority owes me and think them through. It is as if the car owner offered: "take this car; I promise you that you'll help me fix it if it breaks." This makes the deal less enticing.

(2) The guarantee induces me to accept the deal because it gives me reason to trust the car owner; this is its primary rationale. But there is also a secondary rationale: the guarantee gives me confidence that my interests will not be injured if a breakdown does occur. Repairs fix cars. But arguments do not fix propositions; they do not make the proposition true. If I take the proposition with the argument—guarantee, I may end up with a lot of arguments and a proposition that's still false. Again, this makes the deal less enticing.³

(3) And there is a tertiary rationale provided by guarantee, which I will only mention here. I can be reasonably sure that I will be able to hold the car owner responsible if he defaults on his guarantee. But I may think that it





will be hard to hold the authority responsible if proposition ends up to be false and none of his arguments convince. A failure to fulfil a burden of proof may be less apparent than a failure to fulfil a burden of repairs. And again, my inability to hold the authority responsible makes the deal unenticing.

(4) Finally, on a more general level, the contours of the deal Rühl proposes for authority do not seem to match the contours of the practice of authority as we encounter it in our everyday lives. His guarantee deal has a sort of openness: the original assertion of authority would always have the potential of being extended into a longer process of arguing. But this is not what happens in paradigmatic cases of the exercise of expert authority. I go to the doctor not for arguments but for an opinion. If I am dissatisfied with the opinion, I don't seek arguments, I get a second opinion. Indeed, I would be unable to understand the doctor's arguments if she gave them. Experts have not just more but different knowledge; what I ordinarily experience as my arms, legs, head and so on, the doctor sees as physiological systems, cells, bacteria, organic chemicals. If she answered my doubts and objections in these terms, she would simply raise new doubts and objections for me. I would have to become a doctor myself to understand her; but I seek the doctor's advice in part because I don't want to spend my time going to medical school.⁴

Our ordinary practices of expert authority do not seem to exhibit the openness Rühl's model predicts. There is, however, one situation in which the argument deal as Rühl presents it may work better, and that is in the dialogue between students and teachers (which I believe is a focus of his longer work). Unlike the rest of us, students talk with experts specifically in order to become experts themselves. The teacher is ordinarily willing—indeed, delighted—if the student raises doubts about what she says and listens to her response. And it is not implausible to say that by holding herself out as a teacher, she has undertaken an obligation to answer all such reasonable questions asked of her.

In summary: Rühl has begun an engaging inquiry into the pragmatic basis of the appeal to authority. His conception that one person's commitment to provide arguments can function as an inducement for another person to do something with a proposition appears to be quite sound. If I have indicated doubts that this is what happens in an appeal to authority, I do want to recognize the insights of his analysis and their potential applicability to other situations in which we deal with propositions.

Notes

1. I skip here the possibility of receiving other kinds of value from taking a proposition to be true, e.g. those discussed by James in his "Will to Believe" or Pascal in his "Wager" argument. I also assume for the purposes of this response that believing true things has value. 
2. Fred Kauffeld, "Presumptions and the distribution of argumentative burdens of proof in acts of proposing and accusing." 
3. This concern might be alleviated if the arguments were not intended to prove the proposition true, but to make manifest the fact that it had certain properties, such as the property of being rationally defensible. 
4. Perhaps something stronger can be said. At least with some exercises of authority (viz., what I elsewhere at this Conference describe as the "authority of command," as opposed to the "authority of expertise") even asking for arguments in support is a form of denying the authority. When the sergeant tells the private to salute, the private had better not raise doubts and objections. 

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